

## Islamophobic Tropes (Advanced)

### Reading 1: Culturally Incompatible

**Directions:** With your group members, read the following text<sup>1</sup> and then discuss the connection questions together.

The trope alleging that Islam and Muslims<sup>2</sup> are culturally incompatible with the West has been circulating for almost one thousand years, since the Crusades (1096–1291). Pope Urban II's 1095 speech, which is viewed as launching the Crusades, is full of religious animosity: he refers to Muslims as 'enemies of the Lord', falsely accusing them of having 'defiled [altars] with their uncleanness' and of forcibly circumcising men and raping women.<sup>3</sup> This placed Muslims as a violent and cultural 'other' in the minds of European Christians.

This view of Islam as culturally inferior, violent and oppressive to women remained, impacting the treatment of Muslims during European colonialism (1400s–1900s). When Europeans studied the cultures of the people they colonised, they 'othered' Muslims and painted the Middle East and Asia (the 'East'/'Orient') as less advanced than the West. European colonial powers used these views to justify their oppressive behaviour. Then, in the twentieth century, the narrative that there is a clash of civilizations between Muslims and the West started being spread.

In the present day, this idea of Muslims being culturally incompatible can be seen by responses to Islam in Europe. Media outlets emphasise difference, often depicting Muslims negatively. Many stories focus on terrorism and the oppression of women, making terrorism, violence and misogyny seem like a Muslim-only problem. Suggesting that Islam is inherently anti-women ignores the patriarchal codes of other religions, and the fact that violence against women and gender inequality are society-wide problems (the Quran, which was written in the seventh century, actually gives women rights that were not granted in UK law until the twentieth century).<sup>4</sup> The media also portrays Islamic practices, such as halal meat,<sup>5</sup> sharia law<sup>6</sup> and Islamic dress as culturally backward. The focus on sharia law is often used to suggest Islam is anti-democratic, when in reality it can be practised alongside democracy to guide Muslims in spiritual matters. Moreover, the majority of Muslims in the world live in democracies. Such limited portrayals are a form of cultural racism, and influence how the public sees the relationship between the West and Islam.

These stories of cultural incompatibility ignore that Islam is, like Christianity and Judaism, an Abrahamic<sup>7</sup> religion, and that Muslims have been living in Europe since the eighth century. In what is modern-day Spain and Portugal, Muslims lived alongside Christians for almost 700 years before they were expelled, and there is evidence of interfaith collaboration: Christians held positions involved in government under Muslim rule. In the UK, Moors lived in Elizabethan England (though there was some animosity to their

<sup>1</sup> Some of this text is based on content from a video on this trope made by Get the Trolls Out!, an organisation that works to counter religious hate speech.

<sup>2</sup> Since the emergence of Islam, the terms used to refer to Muslims have changed across time periods; Muslims have been referred to as Ishmaelites, Saracens, Moors, Turks and Arabs.

<sup>3</sup> Different versions of this speech exist. These quotations are taken from the translations of several versions that can be found here: 'Medieval Sourcebook: Urban II (1088-1099): Speech at Council of Clermont, 1095, Six Versions of the Speech', Fordham University, accessed 25 January 2023.

<sup>4</sup> What factors determine the changing roles of women in the Middle East and Islamic Societies?, PBS, 2002, accessed 25 May 2023.

<sup>5</sup> For meat to be halal, a prayer must be said when the animal is slaughtered, the animal must have its throat cut in a way that cuts both carotid arteries and its blood must drain out. A similar practice, minus the prayer, is followed to prepare Kosher meat in Judaism.

<sup>6</sup> Sharia law uses the Quran to guide Muslims on how they should live (religious scholars help Muslims interpret how their actions align with the Quran). As the Quran is interpreted in different ways, sharia law can differ. Sharia law can function alongside democracy as it can guide people on their behaviour and identity as a Muslim.

<sup>7</sup> Islam, Christianity and Judaism all recognise Abraham (Ibrāhīm in Arabic) as the first prophet, and are centred around the worship of the god of Abraham/Ibrāhīm, who in Islam is called Allah; other prophets they share include Yakub/Jacob, Ayub/Job and Musa/Moses.

presence), and Muslim sailors from Yemen and Somalia started settling in the port cities of Cardiff and Liverpool in the late 1800s (their descendants still live there today). More recently, in the 1950s and 1960s, people from former British colonies, such as Pakistan, Cyprus and Nigeria, emigrated to Britain, having been invited to fill labour shortages after the Second World War. Some worked in construction and coal mines, while others were medics, engineers and scientists. At the time, Muslim immigrants were seen as a blessing to Europe, helping it to recover from the war.

During the 1970s, many immigrants, who were already in Europe, brought over family members to settle in their new countries. As European economies worsened in that period, media attitudes towards migrants changed. While there have been many refugees from Muslim countries in recent years, due to the 'War on Terror' and the Arab Spring, the majority of Muslims in Europe are citizens, who were born and raised here. In the media, however, Muslims are depicted as foreign, 'other', and people to be wary of.

Saying Islamic culture is incompatible implies that Muslims are incapable of living and functioning in the West, but this has been happening for centuries. Moreover, the Western world has been historically shaped by Islam and Muslim people: Muslims developed new disciplines, like algebra and chemistry and made major advances in medicine, astronomy, engineering and agriculture. Despite these similarities, the media often tries to paint Islam and Muslims as an 'other'.

## Connection Questions

Discuss the following questions together. Then, write a short summary of the reading in your notebooks. You will be sharing your summary with a new group in the next part of the activity.

1. What does the Islamophobic trope of cultural incompatibility allege?
2. What emotional response does this trope seek to provoke? How does it seek to influence attitudes towards Muslims?
3. What are the similarities and differences between how the Islamophobic trope of cultural incompatibility has been used throughout history and up to the present day? What does the evolution of this trope teach us about discrimination/Islamophobia?
4. What does the content of this article make you think and feel? Explain your answer.
5. In your own words, write a two- to three-sentence summary of this article in your notebook.

## Islamophobic Tropes (Advanced)

### Reading 2: Oppression of Women

**Directions:** With your group members, read the following text<sup>1</sup> and then discuss the connection questions together.

This trope asserts that Islam is inherently a misogynistic religion that oppresses women and that women need to be protected from Muslim men. Tied into this trope is also the belief that Muslim women are submissive. These ideas are not new: they have been in circulation since the emergence of Islam. In the seventh century, the monk and priest John of Damascus argued Islam harmed women by allowing divorce, and by allowing men to have mistresses and multiple wives.<sup>2</sup> These narratives of gendered Islamic oppression continued over the next thousand years: at the end of the eleventh century, Pope Urban II referred to Muslims raping women as a means of galvanising Christians to take up arms against them; in the sixteenth century, the Christian theologian Martin Luther criticised polygamy and its impact on women, implying that, by contrast, Christianity treated women with respect; and French orientalist painters in the nineteenth century depicted women as sexual objects in servitude to Muslim men.

It is important to note that while these historical figures may well have been shedding light on genuine oppression, they ignored Christianity's place as a patriarchal religion, which throughout its history has depicted women as inferior to men; as sexual temptresses, ready to lead men into sin (as Eve did in the Bible); and as existing only to serve men as loyal wives and mothers. They also ignored state-sanctioned oppression of women, which has seen women hunted and murdered as witches in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, and laws denying women key rights, such as the ownership of property. Critiquing Islam for its treatment for women, therefore, may have been more about politics and 'othering' Islam than about fighting for women's rights.

Moreover, women in Islam have had their rights considered and have played active roles in a society throughout history. The Quran, which was written in the seventh century, outlines Muslim women's marriage, property and inheritance rights (in the UK, women did not gain these rights in law until the twentieth century).<sup>3</sup> Women have also been heads of state in Islamic countries.

In the present day, a key part of the narrative concerning gendered oppression in Islam revolves around what women wear, notably the use of face veils, such as the niqab or the burqa, and head coverings, such as the hijab. These garments are seen as evidence that women are oppressed and/or submissive and, to some people, are symbols that Islam is a patriarchal and backward religion. The practice of women wearing headscarves, however, is not unique to Islam: many female Christians and Jews still wear headscarves to this day.

While some interpretations of Islam, such as those guiding the rulers of Iran, Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia, deny women basic freedoms and/or choice over whether or not to wear a headscarf, many Muslim women, particularly those living in Western European countries, choose to wear one. Fighting against Muslim women wearing head coverings on the grounds of equality and feminism (and in some cases, as in France and the Netherlands, banning face coverings) can, therefore, deny women the right to choose for themselves and is thus, ironically, oppressive. Moreover, debates about head coverings often

<sup>1</sup> Some of this text is based on content from a video on this trope made by Get the Trolls Out!, an organisation that works to counter religious hate speech.

<sup>2</sup> Todd H. Green, *The Fear of Islam: An Introduction to Islamophobia in the West* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> What factors determine the changing roles of women in the Middle East and Islamic Societies?, PBS, 2002, accessed 25 May 2023.

exclude the voices of Muslim women who wear them, thereby creating a stereotypical and one-sided view.

The narrative of Islam oppressing women is further reinforced by media coverage. Often, stories about Muslims or Islam are accompanied by images of women wearing a full-face veil, whether such images are relevant or not. Images of Muslim women in religious clothing are also used for negative news stories, which was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>4</sup> The overuse of such images reinforces the trope that Islam oppresses women in the minds of non-Muslims, singling out Muslims as different and as a group to be feared. Such coverage is also misleading: only 0.003% of women in Europe wear the burqa or niqab. This idea of oppression of women is reinforced by the media's focus on honour killings and sexual assault in Muslim communities. These issues must be reported on, but violence against women is not unique to Islam: it is a form of patriarchal oppression that needs to be challenged as such.

Moreover, by focusing on negative stories, the media misses out on the opportunity to create a more realistic image of Muslim women, and celebrate their achievements and successes. This imbalance adds further fuel to this trope.

## Connection Questions

Discuss the following questions together. Then, write a short summary of the reading in your notebooks. You will be sharing your summary with a new group in the next part of the activity.

1. What does the Islamophobic trope concerning the oppression of women allege?
2. What emotional response does this trope seek to provoke? How does it seek to influence attitudes towards Muslims?
3. What are the similarities and differences between how the Islamophobic trope concerning the oppression of women has been used throughout history and up to the present day? What does the evolution of this trope teach us about discrimination/Islamophobia?
4. What does the content of this article make you think and feel? Explain your answer.
5. In your own words, write a two- to three-sentence summary of this article in your notebook.

<sup>4</sup> Faisal Hanif, *British Media's Coverage of Muslims and Islam (2018-2020)*, Centre For Media Monitoring, November 2021, pp. 144-56, accessed 14 December 2022.

## Islamophobic Tropes (Advanced)

### Reading 3: Terrorism and Violence

**Directions:** With your group members, read the following text<sup>1</sup> and then discuss the connection questions together.

At the root of this trope is the notion that Muslims and Islam are a threat to the security of Western society. Its origins can be traced back almost one thousand years to the Crusades, when Muslims were depicted as the violent and barbaric enemy of Christianity. In Pope Urban II's 1095 speech, which is seen as triggering the Crusades, he refers to Muslims as torturing and murdering Christians in a brutal fashion: disembowelling them, tying them to posts and piercing them with arrows, and cutting off their heads. This bloody and savage portrayal of Muslims had a lasting impact, influencing how Islamic empires, such as the Ottoman Empire, were viewed. While Islamic empires did conquer new territory and fight against others, the perception of Islam as uniquely violent ignores the history of all major religions and empires.

The association of Muslims with terrorism specifically is a more recent phenomenon, gaining widespread traction after the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, which created a direct link between Islam and terrorism in the minds of many people in the West. After 9/11 and the US-led 'War on Terror', the image of Muslims as terrorists became more established and drove the UK government's policies, both at home and abroad. The 'War on Terror' led to the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, and led to Muslims being put under surveillance, watched in schools and stopped at airports.

The threat of extremist terrorism is real, but Muslim extremists are not the only perpetrators; far-right extremists have also been engaging in acts of terrorism (far-right terrorism is now regarded as the greatest threat in the UK). There is, however, a difference in how the media reports on terrorist attacks: Muslims are readily associated with terrorism and media outlets refer to Islamic practices or phrases such as 'Allahu Akbar' (which means God is most great) when reporting on cases, suggesting that terrorism is advocated for by Islam. Like in both the Bible and the Torah, in the Quran there are some passages which extremists have misinterpreted to justify their actions.

Moreover, when it comes to far-right acts of terrorism, there is more reticence to name them as such. Media stories often focus on humanising the perpetrator by depicting them as mentally unwell and/or attempt to label them as a 'lone wolf', suggesting that they are a one-off problem. The attacks in Christchurch, New Zealand, and in Norway, as well as the international far-right network that radicalises people online, highlight that this is not the case.

When an act of terror is perpetrated by a Muslim extremist, the entire Muslim community is expected to apologise for and condemn the actions of the extremist. This rarely happens to other groups. There is also a sharp rise in anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic sentiment after terrorist attacks as Muslims are treated as guilty by association and unjustly targeted. The broad and diverse Muslim community is treated discriminatorily for the actions of a small extremist minority.

There is anti-Western sentiment in some Muslim-majority countries and among some Muslim communities, and this can motivate some extremist individuals to engage in acts of terror. One of the perhaps more uncomfortable elements to consider is what the roots of this sentiment are, and how

<sup>1</sup> Some of this text is based on content from a video on this trope made by Get the Trolls Out!, an organisation that works to counter religious hate speech.

colonialism and Western-led wars and interventions in the Middle East have shaped current political and economic struggles, and grievances, in the Muslim world. This does not in any way, shape or form condone acts of terrorism; it suggests the issue is not about Islam, but about geopolitics and oppression.

## **Connection Questions**

Discuss the following questions together. Then, write a short summary of the reading in your notebooks. You will be sharing your summary with a new group in the next part of the activity.

1. **What does the Islamophobic trope concerning terrorism allege?**
2. **What emotional response does this trope seek to provoke? How does it seek to influence attitudes towards Muslims?**
3. **What are the similarities and differences between how Islam has been depicted as violent throughout history and up to the present day? What does the evolution of this trope teach us about discrimination/ Islamophobia?**
4. **What does the content of this article make you think and feel? Explain your answer.**
5. **In your own words, write a two- to three-sentence summary of this article in your notebook.**

## Islamophobic Tropes (Advanced)

### Reading 4: Monolithic

**Directions:** With your group members, read the following text<sup>1</sup> and then discuss the connection questions together.

There are almost 2 billion Muslims living in over 232 countries in the world today. Given this large and widespread population, it is not hard to understand that different cultures, values, perspectives and religious practices exist within this broad community – such diversity exists in every social group, religious or otherwise. In the UK, in addition to British Muslims, there are Muslims harking from countries such as Algeria, Bangladesh, Cyprus, Egypt, India, Iran, Kenya, Kosovo, Nigeria and Turkey, to name a few,<sup>2</sup> all with their own customs and interpretations of Islam. However, despite this diversity within the Muslim community, Muslims are often stereotyped and regarded as one homogenous group. This trope not only robs people of their individuality, it also fuels discrimination: if the actions, beliefs and experiences of one Muslim are taken to be representative of the whole community, then one person's act of violence or oppression marks everyone. This rarely happens with people from other religious groups.

This simplified view of Muslims is linked to their depiction as a cultural 'other', a process which began during the Crusades to justify religious conflict and which continued in the centuries after. In literature and religious texts from the Middle Ages, Muslims are referred to as one cultural or religious mass, and often as a barbaric and oppressive enemy. Colonialism, which propagated ideas of European superiority, furthered such simplistic narratives: colonial rulers branded those they colonised inferior and savage, denying them complexity in order to justify inequalities and oppression. When Westerners began to study the East (which was depicted as firmly in contrast to the West), they reinforced this uncomplicated narrative. Although some more complex and positive stories of Islam and Muslims circulated, most were simplistic, negative and/or inaccurate.

In the present day, this idea of Muslims as a monolith lives on. It is spread in the media through generalised portrayals of Muslims, which do not highlight their rich diversity and group them together in a way that is not done to followers of other religions.

In the West, it is not widespread knowledge, for example, that there are two main sects of Islam, Sunnis and Shias, both of which contain subgroups with different interpretations, practices and approaches to Islam. Or that Muslims around the world do not hold the same views when it comes to practices such as wearing headscarves. In Europe, 88 per cent of Muslims surveyed believe a woman should have the right to choose if she wears a veil, while in Sub-Saharan Africa, 40 per cent of those polled agreed. Or that in Muslim-majority countries, there are differences in customs: in Saudi Arabia, the sale of alcohol is strictly forbidden, unless you are non-Muslim, in which case, you can drink in your own home. Whereas in Tunisia, the country has a large wine-making industry and alcohol can be purchased in many places.

Muslims are as diverse and complex as every group in society. Understanding this is vital in combating Islamophobia.

<sup>1</sup> Some of this text is based on content from a video on this trope made by Get the Trolls Out!, an organisation that works to counter religious hate speech.

<sup>2</sup> Jawad Iqbal, *The diverse origins of Britain's Muslims*, *BBC News*, 18 January 2016, accessed 27 September 2022, and *Summary Report: Understanding Muslim Ethnic Communities*, Communities and Local Government, April 2009, accessed 27 September 2022.

## Connection Questions

Discuss the following questions together. Then, write a short summary of the reading in your notebooks. You will be sharing your summary with a new group in the next part of the activity.

1. What does the Islamophobic trope concerning the monolithic nature of Muslims allege?
2. What emotional response does this trope seek to provoke? How does it seek to influence attitudes towards Muslims?
3. What are the similarities and differences between how the Islamophobic trope that depicts Muslims as monolithic has existed throughout history and up to the present day? What does the evolution of this trope teach us about discrimination/Islamophobia?
4. What does the content of this article make you think and feel? Explain your answer.
5. In your own words, write a two- to three-sentence summary of this article in your notebook.

## Islamophobic Tropes (Advanced)

### Reading 5: Islamisation

**Directions:** With your group members, read the following text<sup>1</sup> and then discuss the connection questions together.

In recent years, there has been a rise in people fearing the Islamisation of Western countries. This fear has its roots in a conspiracy theory called the 'Great Replacement' theory,<sup>2</sup> which alleges that the white populations of Western countries are being replaced by immigrants and will eventually be wiped out. In Europe, immigrants of African and Middle Eastern descent, particularly Muslims, are depicted as a threat.<sup>3</sup> Among some far-right groups, especially in America, there is also a religious aspect to this conspiracy: Christianity is seen to be in danger.

This conspiracy has its roots in the images of Muslims peddled by the Christian Church as a means of instigating the Crusades: Muslims were depicted as savage, dangerous enemies of Christianity and as a risk to Christian Europe. In his 1095 speech, Pope Urban II referenced how Muslims had 'invaded' Christian lands, falsely accusing them of having 'defiled [altars] with their uncleanness' and 'polluted [holy places] with their filthiness'.<sup>4</sup> He also refers to them forcibly circumcising Christians and spreading their blood around churches. This latter depiction highlights fears of Muslims enforcing their practices on Christians. The success of many Muslim empires throughout the second millennium CE, notably the long-lasting Ottoman Empire, kept this fear of a Muslim invasion alive in the minds of Europeans.

The 'Great Replacement' theory, which emerged in the early twentieth century, got its name from a 2011 French book called *Le Grand Remplacement*. The book, which asserts that white native European populations are being replaced by immigrants, combines anti-Muslim, anti-Islam and anti-immigration views, and has gained traction among the white supremacist movement. The 'Great Replacement' theory is also antisemitic in nature: white supremacists, referring to the antisemitic trope that alleges Jews control the world, blame Jews for the rise in non-white immigration to Western/European countries. This view that powerful individuals are controlling immigration is relatively widespread: a recent study by the charity HOPE Not Hate found that 20 per cent of those surveyed believe that elites are encouraging immigration as part of a plot to weaken Europe.<sup>5</sup> These views contribute to violence: the far-right white supremacist terrorist behind the 2019 Christchurch terror attack in New Zealand referred to this conspiracy in his manifesto and depicted Muslims and Islam as a threat to Christian Europeans.

This fear of Islamisation is connected to immigration and xenophobia, and is racist and anti-Islamic/anti-Muslim in nature. When referencing immigration, public figures and the media sometimes use sensational or militaristic language, referring to a 'Muslim invasion', or claiming 'Christianity is under attack'. At other times, allusions to Islamisation can be more subtle: newspapers might, for example, highlight the increase in Muslim-sounding names. Fears of Islamisation are also evident in neologisms that merge Middle Eastern place names with European ones. Eurabia and Londonistan,<sup>6</sup> for example,

<sup>1</sup> Some of this text is based on content from a video on this trope made by Get the Trolls Out!, an organisation that works to counter religious hate speech.

<sup>2</sup> This conspiracy theory is also known as the 'White Genocide' theory.

<sup>3</sup> Which immigrants are perceived as a threat is connected to immigration patterns and can vary between regions. In the US, for example, people of colour and Latinx immigrants are targeted.

<sup>4</sup> Different versions of this speech exist. These quotations are taken from the translations of several versions that can be found here: '[Medieval Sourcebook: Urban II \(1088-1099\): Speech at Council of Clermont, 1095, Six Versions of the Speech](#)', Fordham University, accessed 25 January 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Nick Lowles, [State of HATE 2022: On the March Again](#), HOPE not hate, 2022, accessed 9 January 2023.

both emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century in response to immigration and imply that Europe and London, respectively, are being colonised or occupied by Muslims.

While migration and the movement of people has always been part of the human experience, in the last century, migration to Western nations has increased due to globalisation and the connections formed by colonialism. This immigration has faced resistance from some quarters: some are concerned immigrants take jobs, while others fear that accepting people from other cultures is damaging to their own/their nation's identity. However, these fears are more likely to be held by people who have little direct experience of immigration: in the 2016 EU referendum vote, the areas in the UK with a high proportion of leave voters had the lowest levels of immigration<sup>7</sup> – suggesting that living alongside immigrants helps dispel these concerns. The media, which often depicts Muslims in a limited and negative way, may shape the views of those who have no direct experience of Muslims.

## Connection Questions

Discuss the following questions together. Then, write a short summary of the reading in your notebooks. You will be sharing your summary with a new group in the next part of the activity.

1. What does the Islamophobic trope concerning Islamisation allege?
2. What emotional response does this trope seek to provoke? How does it seek to influence attitudes towards Muslims?
3. What are the similarities and differences between how the Islamophobic trope of Islamisation has existed throughout history and up to the present day? What does the evolution of this trope teach us about discrimination/Islamophobia?
4. What does the content of this article make you think and feel? Explain your answer.
5. In your own words, write a two- to three-sentence summary of this article in your notebook.

<sup>6</sup> In the 2000s, the writer Gisèle Littman (also known as Bat Ye'or) wrote a book titled *Eurabia* in which she argues European countries are being brought under Islamic rule, and the journalist Melanie Phillips wrote the book *Londonistan*, in which she argued the UK was at risk of becoming a terrorist state due to Muslim immigration.

<sup>7</sup> Chris Lawton and Robert Ackrill, '[Hard Evidence: how areas with low immigration voted mainly for Brexit](#)', *The Conversation*, 8 July 2016, accessed 15 May 2023.